

New Yorkers Blast Administration Foot-Dragging on 9/11 Health

Monday, 11 February 2008

NEW YORK, NY – Today, Senators Charles Schumer (D-NY) and Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY) and Reps. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY), Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), Vito Fossella (R-NY) and Edolphus Towns (D-NY) demanded that the Administration provide answers within seven days about how it plans to provide care to thousands of Americans who are sick as a result of the 9/11 attacks. In a letter to Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Michael Leavitt, the Senators and Reps. said that HHS officials have not adequately responded to growing concerns that health programs for 9/11 responders and others outside the NYC metro area could be halted within weeks. Limited 9/11 health treatment programs outside the NYC area are currently funded by the American Red Cross, which has said that its funding for such programs is running out.

The New Yorkers noted that nearly two months have passed since the Administration a request for proposals (RFP) to start the World Trade Center Business Processing Center, which would have been the hub of a national 9/11 health program. The letter states that if the Administration "does not take some action... in the next few weeks, there will not be time to announce and process a new RFP in time to keep the program running. Failure to fund treatment - even for a few weeks - is likely to deprive thousands of responders living outside of the New York City metropolitan area of badly needed medical care." HHS refused to send a representative to a House field hearing last month on the Administration's cancellation of the RFP.

"The Administration continues to turn its back on the heroes who helped rebuild a country following 9/11. When the attack happened in New York, people from every corner of America spontaneously answered the call. It is simply tragic to think that HHS would cancel the World Trade Center Business Processing Center, designed to give aid to those same individuals, who are beyond the reach of our area clinics. The heroes who toiled on the pile now suffer debilitating illnesses that are only exacerbated by this Administration's stubborn failure to provide the testing and care they so urgently need," said Senator Schumer.

"Some of the brave people who came from across our nation to aid New York following the terrorist attacks of September 11th became victims themselves after being exposed to the toxic substances at Ground Zero and Fresh Kills. Instead of acting quickly to provide a means to treat those who are suffering, the Administration has responded by canceling solicitations for contracts that would establish a critical program to manage the care of those responders who live outside of New York, and throughout the country. As a Senator from New York, I am grateful for the compassion and dedication these heroes showed our city and its people, and we cannot afford any delay in providing the care and attention they so urgently need," said Senator Clinton.

"The clock is running out on health care programs for thousands of 9/11 heroes," said Rep. Maloney. "We want the Administration to deliver a nationwide 9/11 health program, not more empty promises. Our patience with the Administration's non-response responses ran out a long time ago. Secretary Leavitt needs to finally tell the thousands of Americans who are sick from 9/11 exactly how he plans to meet their health care needs."

"When the smoke was still rising at Ground Zero, concerned and dedicated Americans from across the country came to aid in the rescue and recovery effort," said Rep. Nadler. "In doing so, they selflessly put their own health at risk. Now, the Bush Administration has the chance and obligation to help provide for these compassionate people. The World Trade Center Business Processing Center is critical in efforts to provide health care to the thousands of people across the country whose health was affected by 9/11. This country must meet its moral obligation to the living victims of 9/11 and we must move forward with this program."

Rep. Fossella said, "The news that HHS pulled the plug on the World Trade Center National Business Center marked a sad chapter in our efforts to secure a full federal commitment to those people who are sick as a result of their work on 9/11. The federal government has still not told us what the alternative will be or the level of its commitment to these unsung heroes. It makes no sense that at a time when more centralized data on sick 9/11 workers nationwide is needed,

HHS refuses to move forward with this important initiative. My colleagues and I will continue to fight for those who have become sick as a direct result of working at ground zero, regardless of where they live."

"The refusal of HHS to plan for health care for 9/11 heroes is inexcusable. They seem to think that the issue will just go away. If HHS had sent a representative to our hearing in January, they would have heard from 9/11 responders whose health and financial problems keep getting worse and worse. The challenges these heroes are facing aren't going away, and we in Congress won't go away until they are taken care of," said Rep. Towns.

The full text of the letter follows below:

February 12, 2008

The Honorable Michael O. Leavitt

Secretary

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

200 Independence Avenue, SW

Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Mr. Secretary:

This letter is in response to a letter that we received on February 5 from Dr. Julie Gerberding, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, regarding the cancellation of the request for proposals (RFP) for the World Trade Center (WTC) Business Processing Center, the mechanism which would provide treatment to the sick heroes who came from all parts of the country to respond to the 9/11 attacks. The response from Dr. Gerberding fails to address our concerns about the potential impact of this action that is jeopardizing the health of thousands of WTC responders.

While we appreciate your commitment to maintain continuity of services, the fact remains that there is no well-established program outside of the New York metropolitan area to serve the health care needs of responders across the nation. And the track record of the federal government in trying to establish national programs to address 9/11 health is disappointing. The Government Accountability Office has repeatedly criticized the lack of consistent medical monitoring for federal employees following 9/11. As a result, we must once again reiterate the urgency of developing a reliable mechanism to ensure that our heroes get the care that they need and deserve.

Of particular concern to us is that fact that Dr. Gerberding's letter provides no schedule for reviewing the cancellation of the request and determining how to proceed with providing care to those who are sick. If your department does not take some action to develop a mechanism to pay for the medical treatment for WTC-related medical conditions in the next few weeks, there will not be time to announce and process a new RFP in time to keep the program running. Failure to fund treatment - even for a few weeks - is likely to deprive thousands of responders living outside of the New York City metropolitan area of badly needed medical care for the illnesses that they have developed as a result of their exposure to a cocktail of toxins while assisting our nation in its response to the 9/11 attacks.

Those who are now sick because of their exposure to the toxic substances released in this attack showed no hesitation when called to serve. Yet they are now faced with potential delays in care because of the inability of your department to

agree on a request for proposals, five months after a pre-proposal conference was held in New York City. We ask that you provide us with a response to this letter within the next week that clearly lays out a schedule for developing and implementing a comprehensive strategy for providing care to these workers.

Sincerely,

Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator

Hillary Rodham Clinton
United States Senator

Carolyn B. Maloney
Member of Congress

Jerrold Nadler
Member of Congress

Edolphus Town
Member of Congress

Vito Fossella
Member of Congress

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